

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

We all socialize, communicate, behave, learn, move, and function in different ways, that is what makes us unique! For some people, these everyday functions can be difficult or look different than what we may be used to.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental disorder that impacts how an individual communicates and socializes with others, how they behave and move around, how they learn, and how they develop throughout their life. We do not know a great amount about what causes Autism, but what we do know is that this disorder can be caused by differences in the structure or function of the brain such as if a person is born with a genetic condition. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), about 1 in every 44 children are diagnosed with Autism.

Does it Affect My Child?

Autism can begin within the first 3 years of a child's life and symptoms can be noticed as early as before their first birthday. Most commonly, symptoms are noticed due to developmental delays throughout childhood. These delays can be recognized by monitoring a child's progress through known developmental milestones pertaining to communication, language, and motor skills, as well as how a child behaves or responds to events.

Warning Signs and Symptoms

Communication/Language	Motor Skills	Cognitive/Learning Skills
Avoids eye contact	Difficulty with or does not use gestures	Has trouble paying attention
Does not express emotions or utilize facial expressions	Has trouble playing with toys	Difficulty making decisions and planning
Has a hard time acknowledging the emotions of others	Repeated behavior or movements	Difficulty utilizing self-control

It is important to note that these symptoms can vary in degree of severity based on the individual and some people may experience some of these symptoms without meeting the criteria for an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis

These symptoms must also be **present in early developmental periods**, cause **clinically significant impairment in areas of functioning**, and these symptoms **can not be explained by an existing intellectual disability**.

How Do I Find Out If My Child Has Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder can be detected as young as 12 or 18 months and a valid diagnosis of this disorder can be made by the age of three. While some people are diagnosed within the first few years of their lives, others are not diagnosed until much later on, during adolescents or even adulthood in some cases. There is no physical test that is taken in order to determine whether a person has ASD or not, instead, it is important that developmental milestones are monitored and at times reflected back on. Doctors often review a child's developmental history or behavior to make a proper diagnosis.

In order to monitor a child's development, each age group aligns with an age-appropriate developmental milestone. These milestones are often focused on areas such as social interaction and communication, motor skills and behavior, and cognitive abilities. This monitoring can take place at home through parent or caregivers' observations as well as at checkups at a child's primary care physician's office by a doctor or nurse. The process that nurses or doctors conduct is considered a developmental screening. These screenings occur at well-child visits and are commonly conducted during the first few years of a child's life every few months. Common times where well-child visits should occur, and developmental screenings should take place are at the ages of 9 months, 18 months, 24 months, and 30 months. These early screenings allow for unmet developmental milestones to be acknowledged and addressed at an earlier age. These are also paper screenings and checklists that may be utilized by a parent or physician in addition to the physical examination that is conducted every few months.

If deficits are noticed, a further evaluation may be requested by the physician to determine if a diagnosis is appropriate. This evaluation consists of a professional observing the child, providing a test for the child to take, taking into consideration observations and screenings that parents or caregivers have completed, as well as the experiences that the child reports. All of this information as well as the developmental history of the child will be considered in order to make an accurate and informed diagnosis if necessary.

Treatment Options

Autism Spectrum Disorder can be treated in a variety of ways based on the needs of the person with Autism. Treatment can be focused on behavioral, developmental, educational, socio-relational, and psychological function or a combination of these categories. Treatment can take place at school with a school counselor and/or accommodations made within the classroom through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), in a clinical setting with occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and/or psychologists and psychiatrists, and at home with parents and/or caregivers. These resources can be utilized individually or in collaboration with one another based on the need of the child. Ultimately, the goal of treatment for this disorder is to improve a child's daily functioning and promote independence.

Areas of Need	Treatment Options
Behavioral	Applied Behavior Analysis: focuses on increasing positive or necessary behaviors and decreasing negative or not necessary behaviors
Developmental	-Speech and Language Therapy: focuses on increasing the ability to communicate and understand and use language

	-Occupational Therapy: focuses on developing and completing daily living skills independently
Educational	Individualized Education Program (IEP): focuses on providing resources and necessary accommodations and services in an educational setting
Socio-Relational	-Social Stories: focuses on helping individuals understand social interactions and develop social skills
Psychological	-Counseling or therapy: commonly focuses on improving emotional awareness and emotional management or other cooccurring mental health issues

Resources and Readings

Parents:

Websites:

- To learn about Autism Spectrum Disorder research: <https://www.autism.org/>
- To learn about the symptoms and causes, as well as the screening process and possible interventions: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>
- For support and to learn about other families experiences with Autism: <https://www.myautismteam.com/>
- To track your child's development: <https://neurabilities.com/evaluation-awareness/>
- A full guide of resources for parents: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/resource-guide>

Books: (All available on Amazon)

- To hear first-hand knowledge and experiences of Autism Spectrum Disorder: Higashida, N., & Mitchell, D. (2021). *The reason I jump: One boy's voice from the silence of autism*. (K. A. Yoshida, Trans.). Sceptre.
- To be introduced to a new perspective: Prizant, B. M., & Fields-Meyer, T. (2022). *Uniquely human: A different way of seeing autism*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- To hear from the perspective of a parent with Autism: Notbohm, E. (2019). *Ten things every child with autism wishes you knew*. Future Horizons.

Children:

Websites:

- To practice and learn about skills through activities, songs, videos, etc.: <https://do2learn.com/>
- To learn about many apps that are available that may be helpful with increasing skills or knowledge: https://www.crisisprevention.com/Library/65-Awesome-Apps-for-Autism?i=t&utm_source=informz&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Supportive+Stance
- Virtual summer camp for students with disabilities: <https://www.buddeconnect.org/>

Books:

- To learn about Autism Spectrum Disorder: Thomas, P., & Keay, C. (2019). *I see things differently: A first look at autism*. Barron's Educational Series, Inc.
- To learn about sensory experiences: Parker, L. R., & Burgess, R. (2021). *Wiggles, stomps, and Squeezes Calm My Jitters down*. BQB Publishing.
- To teach children about functional, reading, and language skills: Delacre, L., & Swanson, K. (2012). *Jay and Ben*. Lee & Low.

Adolescents:

Websites:

- To learn about Autism Spectrum Disorder: <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/autism.html>
- Online workshops for teens: <https://www.aane.org/resources/family-and-friends/teens-support-groups/>
- To learn about hygiene:
 - o Boys: <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/autism-hygiene-boys.html>
 - o Girls: <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/autism-hygiene-girls.html>

Books:

- To embrace our differences: Bryce, L. (2012). *I love being my own autistic self!* Landon Bryce.
- To learn how to navigate life as a teen on the spectrum: Castellon, S., Burgess, R., & Grandin, T. (2020). *The spectrum girl's survival guide: How to grow up awesome and autistic*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- To learn about others' experiences with Autism: Panteleakos, N. (2020). *Planet earth is blue*. Yearling.